The Biopolitics of Gender

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For Beatriz and Heimo
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The Biopolitics of Gender
Introduction

Gender, Genealogy, Biopolitics

In The Will to Knowledge, the first volume of The History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault identified sexuality as one of the defining biopolitical technologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Just as sexuality became the subject of scientific and biopolitical discourse in the nineteenth century, gender has become the major sexual discourse of the mid-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Gender has occupied its place as the cultural nominator of sex for only a half a century, yet few in the English-speaking world will associate it with anything other than the sexual order of things. Etymologically, gender, originating from the Old French *gendre*, which is traceable to the Greek *genos*, has referred to kind, type, or sort. Before the 1950s, gender could be used to refer to various types, varieties, kinds, or modes of any sort of phenomena, sometimes sex, but not necessarily. Its only regular usage was in linguistics, where it was used to classify nouns as masculine, feminine, or neuter. At some point in the twentieth century, gender went from being a nominator of types and became bound to the sexual order of things.

As with sexuality in the Victorian period, over the last sixty years the notion of gender has become an entire field of knowledge and a discursive fact that is spoken about, theorized, and contentiously debated. Feminists famously took up the discourse in the 1970s to challenge biological determinism. The study of gender has been institutionalized in the academic discipline of Gender Studies. In government, “women” have been replaced
by “gender” in policy-making processes with the aim of introducing more comprehensive policies to advance equality between women and men. Gender has become commonplace to the extent that it is often a synonym for sex in everyday conversations and bureaucratic forms. It has become a key variable in social scientific surveys of different sociopolitical phenomena like voting, representation, employment, salaries, and parental leave decisions.

It seems that, to paraphrase Foucault, gender belongs to the twentieth century like fish to water—it could not have emerged anywhere else.¹ The very fact that gender is talked about as never before—what is it, is it significant, how does it affect this or that part of social, economic, and political life?—may well mean that gender, like sexuality, is a historically specific discourse of sex. If gender is a discursive event of sex, and if we accept Foucault’s analysis of sexuality as an apparatus of biopower, then it follows that gender too should be submitted to a similar genealogical analysis that examines its entanglements in the same web of biopolitics in its own historical context.

Second-wave feminism, Simone de Beauvoir, Robert Stoller, and social theory have all been misattributed as the inventors of gender theory.² Its birth actually dates back to 1955 when psychiatrist John Money and his colleagues Joan and John Hampson at Johns Hopkins University published a series of articles on the psychosexual development of intersex patients. At the time, psychological sex, that is, a person’s sense of being male or female was still believed to arise from biological variables, like the gonads or sex chromosomes. Money and his colleagues famously challenged this view and made the radical argument that psychological sex, renamed and retheorized as gender, was learned postnatally. Moreover, they claimed that it was such a strong determinant of role acquisition that it could even override biological variables of sex. The theory that biological and learned sex were not necessarily causally linked to each other was used to make sense of the sexual incongruities of the intersex subject, for example, to explain how an intersex person’s sense of being male or female could contradict biological sex variables. Rather than challenging the sexual order of things with their new scientific arguments, however, the doctors’ idea of gender was used to justify surgeries on children with ambiguous genitalia in the name of social health and order.³ Gender was therefore invented as a mechanism for normalizing, disciplining, and governing sex.

As argued through the genealogy documented in this book, gender is an apparatus of biopower that emerged sixty years ago in the clinic and was instrumental to sedimenting Western postwar capitalism through
the management of sex. For feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, gender was a means of opposing biological determinism and its control over women's life-administering bodies and capacities. Gender theory was deployed concurrently by demographers and sociologists probing for explanations and solutions to declining fertility rates in Western Europe from the 1980s onward. In the 1990s, gender became an integral part of European Union (EU) public policy, aiming to optimize fertility through gender equality policy. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, gender was an identifiable phenomenon or discursive fact in science, politics, and government. It has been an instrument of biopower since its psychiatric birth, designed to uphold the Western capitalist social, political, and economic order through the socialization of individuals into different-sex desiring subjects who would reproduce capital and population.

The context of this book is therefore focused specifically on postwar Western capitalist biopolitics and the shift to neoliberal modes of governmentality from the 1980s onward. Indeed, nowhere has this deployment of gender culminated in the workings of biopolitical and neoliberal governmentality as it has in Western Europe today. In the 1990s and 2000s, gender equality made headway as a policy problem for governments of highly industrialized Western societies largely as a response to the economic threat posed by declining fertility rates (Duncan 2002; Stratigaki 2004). A projected shortage of human capital and taxpayers came to be seen as a threat to welfare systems and economic productivity. In the European Union, the “reconciliation of work and family life” has been advanced as a solution to the forecasted economic slowdown over the past two decades, often under the banner of gender equality. Gender equality policy and gender mainstreaming have emerged as significant biopolitical tools of neoliberal governmentality to enable women to work and reproduce, to produce capital and the workforce, thus filling a labor shortage gap, easing the pressure on welfare systems, and ensuring the existence of a future labor force. By governing gender as a critical nexus for population governance, the EU aims to optimize its economy by revitalizing and reorganizing the lives of its labor supply.

In feminist theory, gender is often held to represent a more sophisticated understanding of the world beyond crude biological sex. As Clare Hemmings (2011) has demonstrated, in feminist poststructuralism and queer theory, gender theory is frequently seen as a progressive, knowledgeable, and up-to-date theoretical development moving beyond the essentialist subject of “woman” in favor of multiplicity and performativity. At the same time, feminists recently have also expressed reservations about the way in which gender is being incorporated into government
policies. Not only are governmental gender equality policies criticized for using gender as a synonym for sex rather than as a tool of deconstruction, but feminists have also argued that their ideas are being appropriated to advance neoliberal goals, for example, through the aforementioned policies of gender mainstreaming (e.g., Eisenstein 2010; Squires 2007, 148; True 2003), which feminists argue reduce gender to one variable among many in the attempt to realize good governance (Butler and Weed 2011, 5; Woehl 2008). The neoliberal state stands accused of usurping feminist ideas, de-radicalizing them, and appropriating them to advance economic productivity, competitiveness, and efficiency.

While the way in which gender mainstreaming has been deployed certainly constitutes a neoliberalization of the gender discourse, arguments of usurpation run the risk of suggesting that a “good” feminist concept is being co-opted by “bad” neoliberal forces. Despite its polemical potential, such reasoning is in danger of assuming that gender has a conceptually pure form, that feminists are the custodians of its true meaning, and that it is now being stolen and corrupted by neoliberalism to serve capitalist economic policies. Although it is often mistakenly taken to be so, gender is in fact not the brainchild of feminism, but a biopolitical apparatus whose deployment precedes its use in feminist theory.

Gender is, and has been since its birth, unmistakably an arena of political struggle. For scientists, feminists, and governments alike, the question posed by the idea of gender revolved around the problem of how to govern sex. In the governmental adoption of gender discourse in the EU, for instance, gender equality policy is not only used to advance neoliberal goals—for example, by encouraging men and women to share domestic tasks to increase flexibility in the labor market—but also by attempting to induce women to reproduce the organic bodies that constitute the labor force while simultaneously becoming laboring bodies for capital production themselves. Gender equality policy, in this light, aims to govern the sexual subjectivities, bodies, behaviors, and practices that ensure the reproduction of labor and life.

The postwar invention of gender in the clinic to manage sexual socialization and its present governmental deployment to control demographic and economic processes are not unrelated. Both represent different disciplinary and tactical events in the genealogy of the deployment of gender. They provide an impetus to re-examine gender as a biopolitical apparatus. Foucault’s achievement in Will to Knowledge was to genealogically disrupt the modern discourse of sexuality and unveil it as a technology of power fundamental to the operation of what he saw as the predominant modern mode of politics, biopolitics—politics “situated and exercised at the level
of life” (Foucault 1981, 137). What is ultimately at stake in a genealogy of gender is therefore not how one defines gender, how it works, or whether it is significant or permissible as a social or analytical category. A genealogy of gender asks how “to account for the fact that it is spoken about” (Foucault 1981, 11, emphasis added) and to uncover the technologies of knowledge and power that deploy and maintain it, through what strategies, and with what effects.

While this book can be seen in part as a continuation of Foucault’s biopolitical genealogy of sexuality, it is also a critical intervention into feminist gender theory, questioning the feminist reliance on the discourse of gender and issuing a warning about its contingent nature as a concept for emancipatory struggles. Feminist engagements with the gender discourse may challenge biopower and biopolitical discourses, but their challenge is always a limited one. The debates over gender, even feminist ones, are necessarily entangled in the debate over how to govern sex, and therefore, in a precarious game of truth and life. In this sense, feminist gender theory is also a site of production, albeit a radicalized one, of the power-knowledge of gender and sex.

For feminist thinkers like Rosi Braidotti who never warmed to the notion, gender has long marked a “crisis point in feminist theory and practice” (1994, 150) as theoretically vague and politically ambivalent. A genealogy of gender tasks itself with instigating another sort of crisis of gender by suspending all theories of gender, “unlearning” (Rabinow 2009, 39) them and questioning the conditions of knowledge by which gender is produced as a discourse in the first place, starting with its birth in Johns Hopkins University in 1955, through its counter-deployment in feminist theory, to its present governmentalization in Europe. It asks how gender entered the realm of the sexual apparatus in the first place, what biopolitical strategic and tactical functions it performs. It shows how the idea of gender, underpinned by powerful theories of sex, behavior, psychology, social order, and power, has enabled the perpetual extension of the apparatus of sexuality into new fields of life, at the level of both the subject and society.

WHAT IS GENDER GENEALOGY?

Foucault radically challenged the popular understanding of sexuality at a time when sexuality had been long accepted as a discursive fact. He argued that it was not an identity or truth of the self but a biopolitical apparatus centered on the question of the management of life of the species.
Similarly, if we examine how gender arose as a discourse centered on the question of life, gender cannot be theorized as a representation of sex nor a cultural construct. It is not a product or effect of a structural system like patriarchy (Pateman 1988), capitalism (Bakker and Gill 2003), or the Oedipal family (Chodorow 1999; Gilligan 1982). Neither can it be treated as a representation of sex (Okin 1979; de Lauretis 1987), an effect of culture (Scott 1992), or a discursive or performative process (Butler 1999). Rather, it must be figured as a historically specific technology of biopower. To examine gender genealogically it is necessary to suspend all theories of gender—including theories of its cultural construction—and examine the conditions of possibility that enabled its emergence. These, I argue, are fundamental prerequisites for engaging in such a genealogy.

As Lynne Huffer has recently suggested, readers of Foucault, including queer ones, seemed to have missed the importance of biopower in his genealogy of sexuality, especially the central point that sexuality is above all a question of “life-administering violence” (2010, 254). Indeed, for Judith Butler, for instance, whose gender theory represents the most well-known Foucauldian and genealogical theory of gender, biopower is never the central mechanism governing gender (Repo 2014). While Butler recognizes that Foucault associates sexuality with “regulatory practice[s],” she argues that the Lacanian notion of prohibition “operates more forcefully and less contingently” (Butler 1999, 36) as the mechanism disciplining sex. By arguing thus, Butler’s approach misses out on the strategies and tactics of biopower central to Foucault’s account of sexuality. According to his analysis, what was at stake with sexuality was “the biological existence of a population” (Foucault 1981, 137) through the “administration of bodies and the management of life” (Foucault 1981, 140). Biopower, not law, was the force through which sexuality/sex became necessary as an apparatus of power. The eighteenth century was characterized by the event of “the entry of life into history, that is, the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques” (Foucault 1981, 142). Sexuality in the West therefore emerged as a discourse of biopolitics targeted at making life live by calculating, ordering, rationalizing, and functionalizing the human body and population.

Butler’s gender theory evades these questions of biopolitical strategies and tactics that are central to Foucault’s analysis of the operation of the apparatus of sexuality/sex. Her view of power is strategically disinterested and contingent upon the rules of the dialectical production of meaning that serves to satisfy the subject’s laborious desire for recognition (1999, 89; 1997b, 22). The power relations governing gender are...
explained through the psychoanalytic structures of the incest taboo and the heterosexual matrix. The subjectivities they produce are in turn maintained through the processes of interpellation and performativity. A subject is not a subject and has no agency or claim to speak until it is invoked as a subject by the illocutionary power of language (Butler 1997b, 93, 112; Butler 1997a, 24–25). Instead of deploying the concept of biopower, Butler locates politics in the de-historicized realm of language as a prede-termined set of rules that produces contextually determined subjective norms.

For Foucault, biopower is not reducible to the politically ambivalent dialectical rules of iteration and performativity. (Bio)power, as Foucault writes, is primarily strategic and the task of the critic is to question “what conjunction and what force relationship make their utilization necessary in a given episode of the various confrontations that occur” (Foucault 1981, 102). In other words, biopower is not a thing as such but a concept through which it is possible to interrogate the historically specific force relationships underpinning our political present. This reading of biopower sits uneasily with approaches that characterize biopower as a neutral force that can materialize as a deadly “thanatopolitics” on the one hand and “affirmative biopolitics” of resistance on the other (Esposito 2011; Hardt and Negri 2000). Nor can the nature of biopower be de-historicized and de-contextualized from the political rationalities and technologies that become invested with it (Esposito 2008; Agamben 1998). In the case of sexuality, Foucault reminds us that “the deployment of sexuality has its reason for being . . . in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way” (Foucault 1981, 107, emphasis added). This strategic and material analysis of modern biopower has yet to be fully exploited in feminist theory.

Indeed, Butler’s gender theory is not a genealogy of gender but rather, in her own words, “a genealogy of gender ontology” (Butler 1999, 43). She does not propose a genealogy of the gender discourse but a deconstruction of the acts and conditions that discipline the appearance of something we call gender as a phenomenon in different times and places in history. In her genealogy of gender ontology “gender is a way of ‘existing’ one’s body” (Butler 1985, 510). The aim of genealogy for Butler is therefore to “map . . . out the political parameters of its construction in the mode of ontology” (Butler 1999, 43). Gender genealogy defined thus is an examination of the process by which one is recognized as being of a sex. Butler de-historicizes gender, lending it a phenomenological dimension as a form of existing in and experiencing the world, whereby we can discursively trace subjectivation as it
appears as different kinds of this or that form of identity, this or that mode of existing across space and time.

Butler’s poststructuralist rereading of the sex/gender distinction, where sex is an effect of gender, gives the impression that sex has no genealogy of its own and is nothing other than an effect of gender norms. This theoretical rearrangement is not grounded in an analysis of the discourse of sex itself but a reversal of the sex/gender split that she critiques. Unlike Foucault, for whom sex was an apparatus erected through a biopolitical urgency to govern populations, Butler’s gender genealogy sidelines the question of biopower as the force behind the emergence of sex, whereby she must find an alternative means to account for sex. This she finds in Gayle Rubin’s gender theory, adapting her insights on psychoanalysis and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s theory of kinship to argue that the cultural configurations of the incest taboo form the structural conditions for the production of gender norms. Biopower is therefore replaced by kinship theory as the moderator of the machine of sex, and sex, reduced to an effect of gender, is removed from history.

Some, however, have attempted to historicize sex through the use of gender. Historians of science, for example, have examined the historical emergence of the category of sex by using gender as an analytical tool. The critical necessity of gender as a tool of analysis, however, is questionable. Thomas Laqueur’s significant study *Making Sex* (1990) skillfully demonstrates that the idea of two exclusive sexes only started to emerge as an organizing schema of sex in the eighteenth century as an effect of the development of the biological sciences. Yet, because he conducts his analysis through the sex/gender binary that assumes an ontological split between biology and culture, he ends up with an anachronistic use of biology, as a consequence of which the emergence of biology—and gender—as a specific historical event is lost in the analysis. For example, regarding the Ancient world, he writes that “biological sex, which we generally take to serve as the basis of gender, was just as much the domain of culture and meaning as was gender” (Laqueur 1990, 124). This argument is comprehensible only if we de-historicize biology, culture, sex, and gender as universally recognizable phenomena. Read thus, Laqueur means that in the Ancient world the ontology of the material body was as much a discursive construction then as it is today.

Yet, applying the relatively recent ideas of biology and gender to the past is genealogically problematic. As documented in *The Order of Things*, biology is a discourse specific to modernity that is preoccupied with the classification of living beings (Foucault 1994, 268). Given the historical specificity of the science of biology, one cannot do a history of this science
of life, or for that matter philology or political economy, in the Classical period, simply because they did not exist in the Ancient order of knowledge (Foucault 1994, 166). As Foucault observes, the biological “pattern of knowledge that has been familiar to us for a hundred and fifty years is not valid for a previous period.” If biology was not a familiar grid of intelligibility, it is because it did not exist as “life itself did not exist.” Indeed, prior to modernity, “all that existed was living beings, which were viewed through a grid of knowledge constituted by natural history” (Foucault 1994, 127–28, emphasis original). Therefore, just as we cannot speak of “production” prior to the existence of political economy as a rationale with its own inner coherence, in a Foucauldian genealogical analysis, we cannot speak of biology before the scientific invention of life.

The advantage of employing gender for the critique of sex is of course its powerful ability to examine critically the truth claims of sexual difference in any time or place. Nonetheless, in a genealogical inquiry it is not enough to simply denaturalize and destabilize discourses. Neither is genealogy the methodological equivalent to a conceptual history as its aim is not to provide a history of “knowledge-contents” (Foucault 1991b, 79). Rather, the central aim of genealogy is to examine the conditions of possibility for the emergence, expansion, intensification, transformation, and destruction of discourses. These conditions of possibility are not the universal rules of language and interpellation, but the “complex histories of alliance, support, and reinforcement that facilitate the production of spaces of practical possibility” (Koopman 2013, 107). Gender emerged as a result of such force relations, which is why maintaining it as a tool of analysis would be to turn a blind eye to the power relations that constitute it. Yet, the workings of biopower underpinning the discourse of gender have passed undetected for some sixty years. As Foucault writes, we tolerate power only because it is able to hide its own mechanisms: “secrecy . . . is indispensable to its operation” (Foucault 1981, 86). In the same way, feminist theory has embraced the idea of gender because biopower has concealed itself from its deployment. It is these camouflaged power relations that deploy the discourse of gender that a genealogy of gender strives to unveil and critique.

Once we expose the power relations that condition the very possibility of gender, gender becomes a much more difficult idea for feminist theory. Gender has risen to such a prominent status in Anglo-American feminist theory and beyond as the central tool for critiquing truth claims of sex that some may find it difficult to conceive of how to carry out critical work without the concept. Yet, Foucault did not need the notion of gender to expose sex as a discourse of power, because for him
sex was not an effect of socioculturally constructed norms. Instead he examined the conditions of possibility—the rationalities, institutions, and practices—that enabled the emergence of the apparatus of sex. For Foucault, sexuality and sex are not cultural constructions, but “historical formations, positivities or empiricities” (Deleuze 2006, 41) or eventualizations of thought that organize and discipline, that “impose a particular mode of conduct on a particular human multiplicity” (Deleuze 2006, 29). Likewise, feminist thinkers must consider how gender, as a historical formation, institutes a reordering of things, behaviors, and subjects. The foundational assumption about the ontological status of gender as the construction of sexual difference diminishes the possibility of examining gender as an apparatus of biopower made possible through certain historical formations, and continues to conceal the entanglement of feminist theory with biopower.

Gender, therefore, cannot be made into the object of analysis as long as it operates as a tool of analysis. The first step toward a genealogy of gender is the unlearning of gender as a theory, social structure, or tool of critique. Just as Foucault did not provide us with a theory of sexuality to account for its emergence, there can be no “theory” of gender in a genealogy of gender. Rather, Foucault equips us with the tools for an analytics of power (Foucault 1981, 82). The concept of biopower permits the examination of gender genealogically by rendering gender the object of critique in the form of an apparatus of biopower.

BIOPOLITICAL GOVERNMENTALITY AND THE SEXUAL APPARATUS

*Will to Knowledge* is often read in feminist theory as a historical account of the discursive nature of sexuality, and is then used as a basis for arguing for the discursive nature of gender. In order to engage in a biopolitical genealogy of gender, it is necessary to return to Foucault’s texts, not just the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* but also his other works. This includes Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France, which have been published and translated to English over the past decade. *The Society Must Be Defended* (2003c), *Security, Territory, Population* (2007a), and *Birth of Biopolitics* (2008) lectures in particular have provided political thinkers with an abundance of new concepts and insights with which to develop the analysis of biopolitical governmentality in the twentieth century. Such is the case here as well. Read in conjunction with, and in the context of, the biopolitical rationalities of liberal and neoliberal governmentality, demography, and race, the material and biopolitical aspects of the genealogy
of sexuality in *Will to Knowledge* become more vivid. In effect, the crucial importance of biopower to Foucault’s account of sexuality, and hence, the present genealogy of gender, is highlighted for understanding the conditions of possibility for the deployment of sexuality.

Although there is some inconsistency to be noted in Foucault’s use of the concepts of “biopower” and “biopolitics,” “biopower” should be understood as a concept that can be used to analyze how a certain kind of force charged with regulating life operates to govern bodies and populations. “Biopolitics” in turn refers to a set of strategies, techniques, knowledges, and regulatory discourses deployed to regulate life (Foucault 1981, 139–40). Foucault traces its emergence in the shift from monarchical to liberal Western societies and how its workings have varied historically but also in different political regimes, such as Soviet or Nazi ones. In the biopolitical era, political power is no longer preoccupied with exercising its deadly rights over legal subjects as it did in the era of sovereign power. Both the object and the subject of political power became the life of a population of living beings (Foucault 2007a, 11). The newly born human sciences conceived of man as a living being whose organic life processes were seen as related to economic growth and the state’s prosperity. At the end of the eighteenth century, for example, numerous volumes were published on how to care for one’s body, practice hygiene, raise healthy children, and improve longevity and human lineage. This also entailed the emergence of eugenic racism occupied with protecting and upholding racial purity and numbers. These developments entailed the “entry of life into history” (Foucault 1981, 141), that is, the introduction of biological phenomena of the human species into the sphere of the political through a radical epistemic shift in the order of social, political, and economic power-knowledge.

As Foucault argues in his lectures from 1977 to 1979, the birth of biopolitics was closely tied to the emergence of liberal forms and rationalities of government and the fear of socioeconomic crises. For Foucault, liberalism is not just an economic theory or political ideology, but “a specific art of governing human beings” (Lemke 2011, 45). The liberal credo radically redefined the object and mechanisms of governance through an engagement with the crucial question of why and how to govern rather than merely aiming to maximize state power. The result of this reversal of governmental discourse was what Foucault called “governmentality,” describing the new rationale of the governance of governance. According to the logic of governmentality, government must no longer have a direct hold on things and people but can only intervene so long as the interests of a particular individual or population are at stake (Foucault 2008, 45). Government